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ABSTRACT

A study determined the causes of adult literacy and illiteracy in Newfoundland and Labrador (Canada) as perceived by those in a position to set literacy policy, and used Statistics Canada data from a national adult literacy survey to critique some of these perceptions. Data for the first objective was gathered from a sample of 67 individuals representing a cross-section of educational and literacy policy-makers and advocates across Newfoundland and Labrador. Data for the second objective included direct measures of literacy and demographic information on a random sample of individuals living in Canada. Results indicated that the policy-makers: (1) cited most frequently the school drop-out rate as the cause of illiteracy; (2) believed that parental and home background educational resources were principal contributors to adult illiteracy; (3) believed that greater, more systematic, and higher quality effort and training in the area of adult literacy program development and services was the most promising way to increase the provincial literacy rate. Results of the Statistics Canada data indicated that Newfoundland and Labrador showed significantly lower literacy performance, and that significant differences existed between individuals who lived on different sides of the urban-rural continuum. Findings suggest that the needs and interests of rural residents in Newfoundland and Labrador have not been given the attention they deserve. (Three tables of data are included.) (RS)

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Perceived Causes of Literacy and Illiteracy in Newfoundland and Labrador

Jeffrey W. Bulcock

Report Number 5

Summary Reports of
Paths to Literacy and Illiteracy in
Newfoundland and Labrador

Linda M. Phillips and Stephen P. Norris (editors)

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This study has two objectives: (a) to determine the causes of adult literacy and illiteracy as perceived by those in a position to set literacy policy; and (b) to use Statistics Canada data from a recent national adult literacy survey to critique some of these perceptions.

METHOD

Sample

The data required for the first objective was gathered on a sample of 67 individuals representing a cross-section of educational and literacy policy makers and advocates across Newfoundland and Labrador. They included language arts and primary education coordinators from the province's school boards, senior civil servants from the provincial department of education, community college coordinators, coordinators of community-based literacy programs, and chairpersons and spokespersons for Laubach Literacy Councils throughout the province.

Meeting the second objective depended upon data that had already been gathered in October, 1989, by Statistics Canada on behalf of the National Literacy Secretariat. The data includes direct measures of literacy and demographic information on a random sample of individuals living in Canada.

Instrument

The Perceived Causes of Literacy and Illiteracy questionnaire was developed to collect a variety of data useful in inferring perceptions about the causes of literacy and illiteracy. Section A lists possible reasons why some adults in Newfoundland and Labrador have low literacy levels. Respondents are asked to estimate for what proportion of adults they believe each reason applies. Section B lists statements related to the cause and perception of illiteracy, and respondents are asked to state whether they agree or disagree with each statement. Section C suggests ways to spend public money on adult literacy, and asks respondents to state how much support they would give to each suggestion. Finally, in Section D, background information on respondents is requested.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 lists the ten most frequently cited reasons for low adult literacy.

Individuals who are in a position either to make or influence literacy policy in Newfoundland and Labrador cite most frequently the school drop-out rate as the cause of illiteracy. In support of this we know, based on findings from Beebe (1992) that there is a strong correlation between the drop-out rate and illiteracy. That study showed that 44 percent of its sample of adult illiterates were, as children, frequently absent from school, and on average had left school by 15.5 years old. It should be noted, however, that the average grade completed for the sample was only 6.6, and that completing higher grade levels did not necessarily increase reading comprehension. This means that staying in school longer did not contribute to increased literacy for this sample. Many subjects told the investigators that they knew they were not learning anything in school.

The policy makers also believe that parental and home background educational resources are principal contributors to adult illiteracy (Table 1, items 2-5, 7). Beebe's (1992) results support this view: 25% of the fathers and 9% of the mothers of respondents for that study could not read at all, and 58% and 46%, respectively, had a grade 6 or lower education.

However, as Norris, Phillips, and Bulcock (1992) have shown, even though educational attainment and parents' education are the primary influences on literacy, they do not account (even taken jointly) for the differences in literacy levels between Newfoundland and Labrador and the rest of Canada. Educational and literacy policy makers should attend to this fact, because it should influence the directions they take in trying to improve literacy in the province.

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Table 1

The Ten Most Frequently Cited Reasons for Low Adult Literacy

Rank	Reason
1	They dropped out of school
2	They did not receive adequate support and guidance from parents
3	Not enough to read at home
4	Expectations of parents too low
5	No one at home to help with school work
6	Missed too many days of school
7	Needed extra help in school but didn't get it
8	Suffered emotionally from such things as divorce, abuse, conflict at home
9	Communication between home and school inadequate
10	Placed in special education classes

Table 2 gives the percentage agreement with statements from Section B of the questionnaire addressing the cause and perpetuation of illiteracy. The statements are arranged in descending order of agreement. Table 3 presents the views of policy makers on the allocation of public money for adult literacy.

The tables reveal that the views of policy makers reflect a demand for a greater emphasis on such things as improved adult literacy programs, on the design and use of effective program evaluation systems, on teacher education programs in adult literacy, and on better planning and management systems for more coordinated efforts to reduce illiteracy. Quality control is the operative phrase here. The belief is that greater, more systematic, and higher quality effort and training in the area of adult literacy program development and services is the most promising way to increase the provincial literacy rate.

An improved adult literacy system would undoubtedly have some impact. Nevertheless, the question remains: will the impact of even a greatly improved system for providing remediation to adult low-literates be sufficient to raise the provincial adult literacy levels to at least the national average?

In order to answer this question, it is first important to realize that living in Newfoundland and Labrador stands for something else. This fact was demonstrated by Norris, Phillips, and Bulcock (1992), who showed that living in Newfoundland Labrador had a significant influence on literacy even after the influence of age, education, rurality, and parents' education were taken into account. What

exactly that something else is, is unknown. More than likely, it stands for several factors. Perhaps it stands for attitudes towards schooling; or for the fact that compared to all English speaking provinces, Newfoundland and Labrador was the last to make schooling mandatory; or for the larger number of specified school days that are non-instructional in Newfoundland Labrador compared to the other provinces; or for the fact that the length of the school day is shorter; or that the proportion of children in marginally literate households is higher than in other provinces; or that there is an absence of accountability in the Newfoundland and Labrador system. Norris, Phillips, and Crocker (1992) have presented some evidence that it stands, in part, for the value that individuals place on literacy.

Regardless of what living in Newfoundland and Labrador stands for, the conclusion is inescapable: compared to other Canadian provinces, the factors favouring the widespread acquisition of literacy and numeracy has not been developed in Newfoundland and Labrador as much as elsewhere in Canada.

Beebe (1992) has shown that many of the factors which thwart the remediation of individual literacy problems can be identified and addressed. But there are other (maybe many) factors that operate to create this situation in the first place. The extent to which these factors can be identified and controlled is yet to be discovered.

Table 2

Policy Makers' Views About the Causes and Perpetuation of Illiteracy

Item description	% Agreement
Literacy programs should be evaluated	98.5
Most adults with low literacy are too ashamed to ask for help	94.0
Our economic future depends on improving adult literacy levels	91.0
There are not enough trained adult literacy teachers	83.6
Adults with low literacy are only marginally employable	82.1
Literacy policy is fragmented and politically weak	79.1
The literacy level of the labour force is below that required by employers	74.6
Political leaders do not understand the causes of illiteracy	71.6
Public effort is too feeble to deal with adult literacy	70.1
The diversity of programs is a positive feature	67.2
Literacy programs lack trained personnel	56.7
There is a lack of know how to upgrade literacy	50.7
The reported level of illiteracy is higher than the real level	37.3

Table 3

Policy Makers' Priorities for the Funding of Adult Literacy

Item description	% important or very important
to promote literacy classes in the work place	95.3
to establish teacher education programs in adult literacy	87.3
to evaluate existing programs and services	84.4
to establish programs that integrate literacy instruction, income support and job training	83.8
to develop planning systems which coordinate programs	82.8
to conduct basic and applied research in instructional methods	78.1
to establish accreditation standards that all literacy programs must meet	59.4
to centralize the coordination of programs in Newfoundland and Labrador	53.1
to withdraw funding from programs with high drop out rates	29.7

Narrowing the cause

Using Statistics Canada's data, estimates from the Newfoundland and Labrador sample show that significant literacy performance differences exist between individuals who live on different sides of the urban-rural continuum. Differences in favour of the urban dwellers, some forty percent of the population, were substantial (other things equal), in terms of educational attainment. Similar differences existed for literacy and numeracy. The obvious inference to be made here is that urban dwellers have more favourable opportunities for pursuing educational goals.

Unlike in Newfoundland and Labrador, however, the Canadian sample showed only modest urban-rural differences. Studies of urban-rural differences using data from the archive of the International Association for Educational Achievement show that differences are also negligible in northern European countries such as Finland and Sweden, as they are in eastern European countries such as Hungary. It is fair to suggest, then, that the needs and interests of rural residents in Newfoundland and Labrador have not been given the attention they deserve.

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